

Articles of Doubt

My Articles of DoubtBy: *Martell Strong*With: *Dustin Petersen*

1) I believe that the idea of an omnipotent,^[1] omniscient,^[2] omnibenevolent^[3] God is incompatible with the reality of gratuitous suffering in the world.^[4] I believe that Jesus Christ was a man who probably lived;^[5] however, I have found no compelling evidence that advances the possibility that he lived a divine or miraculous life rather than a strictly mortal one. I believe that what some define as the Holy Ghost is actually phenomena like frisson,^[6] elevation,^[7] and autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR),^[8] which are neither unique to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints nor to religious experiences in general.

2) I do not believe that either the Adam character or the Eve character from the *Old Testament* were ever actual persons. I believe that the story of life, and thus humanity, ultimately began billions of years^[9] before the Biblical timeline suggests^[10] -- and to believe otherwise, one would have to crawl over or under or around the comprehensive body of evidence that suggests a far lengthier process. The preponderance of scientific data does not support the notion that mankind originated from only two individuals ~6,000 years ago in the Garden of Eden. Genetic evidence indicates that many anastomosing lineages diverged and intersected over the course of hundreds of thousands of years.^[11] The population size and diverse genetics of modern society suggest that humanity has not gone through a bottleneck^[12] of anything less than a population of around 10,000 individuals^[13] (and certainly not twice, when considering the story of Noah's Ark and the Flood); instead, the mother^[14] and father^[15] of the human race were not contemporaries; lived as members of separate, large communities located some distance apart; and bear no similarities to the Biblical Adam or Eve other than gender and species.

I find the idea of a person being punished for any of their ancestors' actions or the actions of any other individual to be morally reprehensible. That being said, I recognize that people can make decisions that affect others, including their progeny, in negative ways.

3) I do not believe in the atonement, which is to say that I do not believe that punishing a singular person or being for the actions of others will somehow absolve the original offender from some eternal punishment. Instead, I recognize that actions which are considered evil and immoral -- and thus, constitute crimes or sins -- are defined by people. What is defined as "sin" by any group of people is derived solely from the region and culture from whence they originated. I do not believe that there is one exact set of prescribed religious rituals that comprises the one true path to any putative deity.

4) I believe that three important principles for finding truth are: first, critical thinking;^[16] second, the scientific method;^[17] and third, intellectual honesty.^[18] Any truth claim that has ignored any one of these three principles should be treated with skepticism. Faith in the absence of evidential truth should likewise be treated with a high degree of skepticism. Additionally, I believe that the burden of proof rests upon those making positive claims^[19] -- especially claims so lofty as the existence of a specific deity or the exclusive truthfulness of any religion.

5) I do not believe that one person should exercise religious authority over another person. In other words: if there is a God, I believe that whatever relationship a person has with this God should be personal and must not require a third party to realize any aspect of that relationship. It would be uncharacteristic of an omniscient, omnipotent God to rely on imperfect mortals as intermediaries where direct communications would be more efficient and reliable. Were this God to require any other connection outside of a personal one -- especially when eternal consequences hang in the balance -- the parameters of that interpersonal relationship would be made clear and not rely on the assertions of the very people who claim religious authority.

I believe it is acceptable for one person to share his or her personal religious beliefs with another willing person, but that is where the religious relationship between any two people should end. For example: if concepts like

forgiveness of sins and salvation are assumed to be true, it is more reasonable that a person can achieve these things by interacting directly with God^[20] then by seeking the approval of any “authorized” ecclesiastical leader. Assuming there is a God, it is doubtful this God would employ keepers at Heaven’s Gate who hold special authority to either grant or deny access to “saving ordinances.” Similarly I find no evidence that the Christ of the *Bible* either requires or endorses any scenario in which an individual must divulge private matters to some human authority figure before he or she can access the atonement. Neither do I see evidence of Him teaching that any man or council of men have the authority to either deny the atonement to anyone, or to nullify any “saving ordinance” for any reason whatsoever (see LDS Handbook 1;^[21] sections 1.2, 2.3, 3.3.3, 3.3.4, 3.3.7, 6, etc.).

6) I believe that the manner in which the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is organized represents a superficial attempt^[22] to recreate the organization of the “Primitive Church,” and that the LDS Church does not closely resemble Christianity as it was practiced in *New Testament* times. In fact, many of the policies of the LDS Church and its subsidiary organizations more closely resemble Pharisaical Law^{[21][23]} than the teachings of Christ, despite the Church’s ironic condemnation of the teachings of Pharisees of the *New Testament*.^[24]

7) I have not seen sufficient evidence to convince me to believe in the gift of tongues, prophecy, revelation, visions, healing, interpretation of tongues, and so forth.^[19] It is only reasonable for an individual to believe in the charismatic gifts if he or she has first-hand experience with them. Any account of a miraculous occurrence requires compelling evidence that has withstood rigorous scrutiny before it can be believed.^[25]

8) Historical evidence shows that the *Bible* is an amalgamation of religious texts produced by several, often anonymous writers.^[26] It has been shown that many of the individual books within the *Bible* have more than one author and that some were composed over an extended period of time by several authors.^[27] Since it cannot even be trusted that the books in the *Bible* were written by the people whose names they bear, it is extremely difficult to believe that biblical writings represent the “word of God,” regardless of how accurately (or inaccurately) they have been translated from the “original texts.”

I believe that the *Book of Mormon* does not represent a real history and is largely a work of fiction, except in instances where biblical passages quoted in the *Book of Mormon* are historically accurate (if indeed any of these biblical passages are historically accurate). I believe that the *Book of Mormon* borrows from contemporary works such as *View of the Hebrews*^[28] and *Late War, Between the United States and Great Britain, from June, 1812, to February 1815*.^[29] I believe that anachronisms in the *Book of Mormon*^[30] such as the mention of horses,^[31] cattle,^[32] steel,^[33] wheat and barley,^[34] goats,^[35] etc. provide compelling evidence that it is not a historical account; rather, it is more likely that it is an uninspired work of fiction. I believe that Joseph Smith’s use of a “seer stone” in a hat,^[36] rather than the Golden Plates themselves, to “translate”^[37] large portions of the *Book of Mormon* suggests that the Golden Plates were not necessary in the production of the *Book of Mormon*. Since it appears that the plates were unnecessary in the production of the *Book of Mormon*, it seems unlikely that a putative deity would go through the trouble of having people create them and ensure their preservation, just to have the Prophet of the Restoration set them aside to gaze at a stone in a hat instead. I believe that Joseph Smith’s use of a seer stone to produce the *Book of Mormon* is a strong indication that the Golden Plates did not ever exist, and it is more likely that the *Book of Mormon* was authored by Joseph Smith’s own hand.

Concerning the method of translation, David Whitmer stated that Joseph, “put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear.”^[38] If this character-by-character, phrase-by-phrase account of the *Book of Mormon* translation is to be believed, then one must accept that the Holy Ghost used poor grammar,^[39] plagiarized mistranslated verses from a 1769 publication of the KJV Bible,^[40] and is not capable of communicating as clearly or precisely as mortal men.^[41]

Additionally, I believe that Joseph Smith's gross mistranslation of common Egyptian funerary texts^[42] -- and his acceptance of the fraudulent Kinderhook Plates^[43] as authentic, which is evidenced by his claim to have made a partial translation of them^[44] -- reveal a pattern of fraud and deception, which casts serious doubt on the authenticity of the *Book of Mormon* and Joseph Smith's claims that it contains the "word of God."

9) I see no reason to believe that any god has ever, does now, or will ever reveal anything "great and important" through the leadership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The modern LDS Church's reliance on law firms,^[45] public relations committees,^[46] and official spokespersons^[47] (who are not also "prophets of God") is convincing evidence that there is not a god directing the LDS Church through the Prophet, the First Presidency, or the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, as is claimed. For who could be a better lawyer, more effective at public relations, or a better spokesperson for God or His Church than His/Her Prophets and Apostles acting under His/Her direct revelation and inspiration?^[48] Assuming the "work" is as important and urgent, as is claimed,^[49] there would be no room or time for error or misunderstanding. If there is a God and S/He has an authorized Prophet living on the earth today, there is no reason to think that S/He would rely upon the "arm of flesh" in the form of uninspired, paid spokespersons, committees, and lawyers rather than using the Prophet himself as a mouthpiece.^[50]

Furthermore, it seems unlikely that any putative deity would allow His/Her mouthpiece to make such egregious errors as withholding saving ordinances and priesthood authority to people of African descent^[51] and denying saving ordinances to children^[52] -- policies that are in direct conflict with the teachings of Jesus Christ as recorded in the *New Testament*.^[53] It is more likely that the "prophets" of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have never enjoyed a direct line of communication to the Almighty, otherwise God would never have allowed these inexcusable policies to be perpetuated.

For an organization that purports to be the bearer of "universal truth,"^[54] sourced from an all-knowing being, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is conspicuously not at the forefront of science, medicine, social progress, and general life betterment. If the prophetic claims of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are to be believed, one would expect true Prophets of God to be leaders ahead of their time. Instead, we find that the leadership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, tend to either ride the tides of history, modifying official church positions when the external pressures of science^[55] and society^{[56][57]} dictate; or clinging to antiquated ideas^[58] in spite of the myriad of contradictory evidence.^[59]

10) I do not believe that the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel will ever be literally gathered; I do not believe that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will ever be headquartered in Jackson County, Missouri,^[60] nor do I believe that there will be a mass emigration of Latter-day Saints to Missouri; I do not believe that Christ will ever reign personally upon the earth; and I believe that if the earth were ever to be "renewed", it would resemble anything but "paradisiacal glory."^[61]

11) I believe that people should be allowed to practice their religion freely, as long as the practice of their religion does not interfere with the lives of other people.^{[62][63]}

12) I believe that government and laws are necessary components of civilized society. I believe in obeying, honoring, and sustaining laws as long as they do not interfere with basic human rights.^[64] I recognize that, although Joseph Smith professed that he believed in, "obeying, honoring and sustaining the law,"^[65] he often found himself in violation of established laws.^[66]

13) I believe in having respect for other people and in treating them the way that they would like to be treated. I believe in the pursuit of truth and happiness, and that the human race has not yet reached its full potential in either of these areas. I believe that there are aspects of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that discourage people from learning truth and achieving personal happiness.

Finally, when Joseph Smith wrote, "If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things,"^[67] I cannot help but think that he was referring to teenage girls and married women.^[68]